

Magazine

My word

Keeping it in the family

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Have you ever noticed how many biologists end up with other biologists for partners? At almost any social event, most of the biology types are paired off with other biology types and it can be depressingly hard to avoid discussions about subcloning or the price of microscopes. It's a common phenomenon — doctors and musicians are infamous for marrying their own kind — but it still amazes me just how few of my colleagues have formed relationships with outsiders, even from as far away as another field of science. The difficulties experienced by those who do enter into 'mixed marriages', however, suggest that it's more than just narrow horizons that causes this incestuousness.

As all biologists know, science has an extraordinary way of distorting time. If a piece of work needs just ten minutes to finish, it's inevitable that you will be still slaving at it half an hour later. When you've got a non-biologist waiting for you at home, this causes terrible misunderstandings. It takes someone with direct experience of the 'ten minute experiment' to translate "I'll be leaving in 15 minutes" into "I may or may not be leaving within the next hour, depending on whether the cells/crystals/RNA behave."

Even once you get home, it's often hard to leave the lab behind. For example, β -mercaptoethanol clings terribly to the clothes and skin, and there seems to be no good way to remove the taint before you go home. For normal people there could be few things more repulsive than a partner with a slight sulphurous reek but it seems to drive other biologists into a passionate

frenzy. A touch of radiation can be equally socially unacceptable. My (non-biologist) housemates were most unforgiving when I rushed into the kitchen, tore off my (somewhat tritiated) clothes, and flung them in the washing machine. The atmosphere would have been even icier had I had to share a bed with one of them.

Although this explains, in part, why biologists make poor partners, it doesn't explain how we get attracted to one another. The really appealing thing about biology is its sociability; we talk all the time, before, after and especially during experiments. And, unlike several other scientific disciplines, in biology there is little disparity in the numbers of men and women. There's plenty of opportunity, therefore, for intraspecific relationships to form. On top of that, the workplace offers a surprising number of opportunities for naughtiness — darkrooms, and sometimes showers, have locks — so that every lab has its collection of not-quite-mythical tales of children conceived at work.

It's amazing how few biologists form relationships with outsiders

It may sound as though, as long as biologists stick to their own, everything will be rosy. The trouble is, life is hard enough these days for the single scientist and, if we're paired off, several of the problems we face (which have been discussed in this column) get multiplied. Take jobs, for example. Finding a good job seems to have become a nightmare. How much harder, then, to find two jobs, in the same city (preferably somewhere you both want to live), with good schools and neither partner unacceptably compromising their future prospects. Even that presumes that you're both

at the same stage in your careers. Finding a job a couple of years after your partner is even worse — either you're limited to one city or your other half has to move again two or three years into a job, just when things are getting easier at last.

And then there's the bigger picture. One of the main complaints against scientists is that we can't explain ourselves to the taxpayers who fund our research. Things are not going to get better if scientists set up home with their neighbours from the lab. It's a bit like trying to learn a foreign language when everyone you meet speaks your mother tongue. There are a fair number of schemes in which biologists come out of their ivory towers and try and explain themselves to schoolchildren, politicians or the public. But worthy as they are, they still tend to present the speaker as an over-intellectual creature from a different planet.

I would like to see biologists socializing more with the world outside and, for starters, I propose that funding bodies should get together and set up a dating agency for single scientists, before they get too engrossed with their labmates. An appropriately balanced mix of scientifically illiterate but admiring singles could be recruited, perhaps by means of full-page advertisements in the glossy lifestyle magazines that would say something like "You could snag a mate with an IQ of 180 and some extraordinary personal habits." With time, we should get better at explaining our work and non-scientists might begin to see us as (nearly) normal humans.

Acknowledgments

The author gratefully acknowledges his wife, whose lab is upstairs in the same institute, and he faithfully promises that he'll be leaving in about ten minutes.

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